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AUTHOR Berg, Jerry
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ABSTRACT

Compressed speech tapes--recordings of a voice reading a selection at the normal rate of approximately 150 words per minute that are speeded up to as much as 400 words a minute--can be used successfully with students to provide practice in improving reading rate and comprehension. In a field test conducted with 23 high school juniors and seniors of average and above-average reading ability, students received a total of eight hours of instruction and practice in simultaneously listening to compressed speech tapes and reading the recorded passages. Analysis of the results of pretests and posttests indicated that class members improved significantly in both reading speed and reading comprehension. Students' written evaluations of the program were overwhelmingly favorable. (GW)

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CLASSROOM TEST REPORT: COMPRESSED SPEECH TAPES--AN EFFECTIVE TEACHING TOOL FOR INCREASING RATE AND COMPREHENSION

Jerry Berg
Lane Community College
Eugene, Oregon

Background and Purpose

Teaching machines, as a rule, turn me off. Too often, students in reading labs are "plugged in" to some gadget while the teacher takes attendance and circulates--which usually means helping Johnny or Susie untangle a filmstrip or push the right buttons for the day's lesson.

While no hardware will ever replace a competent, caring, warmbodied teacher, I must admit that compressed speech tapes can work extremely well to reinforce teacher instruction and provide essential skill practice in rate and comprehension improvement. The terms "compressed speech" or "speeded listening" tapes began showing up in educational journals at least a dozen years ago. And although most of the journal articles do suggest that compressed speech tapes may be a valuable tool, these same articles tend to be pedagogical and theoretical. My initial purpose was to field-test a commercially available program in a typical high school or community college classroom. In short, I wanted to try them out in a real, "hands on" setting.

I have been using "regular" (non-compressed) read-along tapes for poor readers, first at the high school and later at the community college level, since 1965. Students listen with earphones and follow along in the book--listening and reading simultaneously. When the book is well-chosen in terms of interest level and readability, student response is usually rather dramatic. Example: tenth graders with 4th and 5th grade reading abilities skipping lunch in order to return to the reading lab and finish a read-along or "talking book."

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Another example: a 35 year old native Hawaiian, with a 3rd grade reading level, who "read" Jack London's STORIES OF HAWAII cover-to-cover. I could go on.

So I've been sold on the motivational merits of talking books for years. But what happens when a normal audio taped voice of approximately 150 words per minute is speeded up to 200, 300, or even 400 words per minute? Let me hasten to explain that compressed speech does not sound the same as the Donald Duck gobbeltygook you hear if you play a 33 1/3 rpm record at 78 rpm. Compressed speech tapes are normal tapes, electronically re-recorded on a machine called a speech compresser. The specific purposes of my field-test were to discover whether or not compressed speech tapes would (1) be as enjoyable for average and above average readers as regular tapes have been for poor readers, and (2) whether or not compressed speech tapes would result in rate and comprehension gains for students at all levels in a typical class of young adults.

Field Test Description

I chose Triangle Lake High School in Triangle Lake, Oregon, simply because it's close to home. Twenty-three of a total 25 juniors and senior at TLHS volunteered for the class. With only three or four exceptions, these were average or above average readers. Their Gates Survey F, Form IM percentiles for speed and accuracy averaged 64 and 66, respectively. The class was set up to meet four days per week, one hour per day for two weeks--a total of eight hours combined instruction and supervised lab practice. I taught the class. Students were encouraged to come in during their free study periods or after school and practice. Most of them did so; extra voluntary lab hours averaged 1.9 per student. Materials used were the Sack-Yourman Speeded Tapes Lab and companion 88 Passages, published by College Skills Center, 1250 Broadway, New York, N.Y. 10001.

The first three sessions were spent on the usual get-acquainted, what-are-we-going-to-be-doing kinds of orientation; pre-testing (passages 1 and 2 without tapes); and teaching basic structural elements of written communication: topic, main idea, supporting details, significance, and conclusion. These five comprehension skills, plus vocabulary in context, are emphasized in 88 Passages.

Each of the next four sessions were divided as follows:

Set Up (5 minutes) Students set up cassette players and earphones, and got their 88 Passages books and folders (containing progress charts and answer sheets) ready.

Small Group Work (35 minutes) Five groups ranged in size from two to six students each. Group assignments were based mainly on the students' pre-test rate scores. They were allowed to progress to a faster group when they felt ready. A typical lesson consisted of simultaneous listening and reading (multi-sensory learning) the same passage twice. Next, each student timed himself or herself on the same passage. Then the group discussed the passage from memory. Discussions consisted of recalling the topic, making a main idea statement about the topic, recalling the supporting details, and stating the significance or conclusion when applicable. My role during these reviews was that of monitor and aide. Finally, each student answered the multiple choice questions in the 88 Passages questions book, and corrected his or her answers. Most groups were able to complete three or four passages during this 35 minute lab session.

Large Group Work (15 minutes) This last segment always involved the entire class. Typically, I presented a structural pattern--i.e. "The passage you are about to read contains an opinion and two reasons to support that opinion, followed by the significance. Look for these elements as you read." Then, I would play the speeded tape, usually at 300 or 350 words per minute, while the

students silently followed along. The tape would be played a second time, we would recall the structural elements I had asked them to watch for, and answer the questions. Finally, I would time the class on the passage, urging them to "beat the clock" by reading the passage faster than the tape speed. During the last ten minutes of sessions 5 and 7, I gave them a practice post-test by timing them on a new passage they had not heard on tape.

Results and Students' Evaluations

The final post-test consisted of passages 3 and 4, timed silently. As with the pre-test (passages 1 and 2), no tapes were used. Test results are summarized in the following table:

	WPM	Comp (per cent)
Pre-test average	289	76
Post-test average	519	90
Per cent average gain	80	14
Per cent median gain	68	15
Range (per cent)	24 to 229	minus 14 to plus 29

Only two students showed a loss in comprehension from the pre to the post test. Note that the class average rate on the post-test is 119 wpm faster than the fastest compressed speech tape speed of 400 wpm. This is as it should be; the tapes are merely an artificial crutch, to be discarded when no longer needed.

Students' written evaluations were overwhelmingly favorable. Here are some typical comments:

"It has improved my reading comprehension greatly."

"Surprised me."

"My wpm and comp increased at an even rate."

"Was moving up faster at every session."

cont.

"A great help in keeping your mind on the passage."

"Sounded funny at first, but not when you read."

"It was challenging and they work"

Conclusion

Read-along tapes work because many students--particularly average and below average readers--tend to be audio learners more than visual learners. Therefore, by the simultaneous input of the spoken word, phrase or thought with its written form, the impact is more powerful than the visual input alone. Adding the speed component only only improves concentration, it also helps the reader break through his or her unnecessarily plodding sub-vocalization barrier and begin to read at a more natural thinking, rather than talking speed. Reading, in short, becomes more meaningful and more fun.